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Third report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1620 (2005), by which the Council established the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL), and requested me to keep it regularly informed of the implementation of the mandate of the Office. The report covers major developments in Sierra Leone and the activities of UNIOSIL since my report of 29 August (S/2006/695).

II. Major developments and governance issues

2. Sierra Leone continued to make progress in its peacebuilding efforts during the reporting period. Further gains were made in reforming the security sector and building the capacity of the national institutions responsible for conducting the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections. Those advances notwithstanding, the Government continues to face profound capacity constraints, the pace of civil service reform remains slow and poverty and unemployment still represent pressing challenges.

3. On 12 October 2006, Vice-President Solomon Berewa addressed the Peacebuilding Commission of the United Nations during its meeting on Sierra Leone in New York. The Vice-President elaborated on the key priorities for peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, stressing that the problem of youth unemployment and marginalization remained the most immediate threat to the country's fragile stability. He acknowledged the capacity constraints facing the country and highlighted the need to keep the reform of the judicial and security sectors on track. The Vice-President also informed the Commission that his Government was determined to promote good governance practices and to consolidate the nascent democracy in the country. To that end, the Government continued its efforts to enhance transparency and accountability in state institutions and to ensure the efficient use of public resources.

4. The Peacebuilding Commission endorsed the priorities identified by the Government of Sierra Leone and took note of the national strategies and frameworks already developed by the Government and its partners, in particular the poverty reduction strategy and the peace consolidation strategy. In that regard, the

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Peacebuilding Commission called on the international community to maintain its engagement in Sierra Leone, including by providing the necessary assistance. The Commission also declared Sierra Leone eligible to benefit from the Peacebuilding Fund, which had been launched on 11 October 2006.

5. On 24 October, the Office of the President of Sierra Leone issued a statement announcing the establishment of a Constitutional Review Commission with a mandate to bring the Constitution adopted in 1991 into conformity with the new political, social and economic realities in the country. The statement also confirmed that proposed constitutional amendments would be included on the ballot during the 2007 elections. In that regard, it is important for the Government and the National Electoral Commission to clarify, without delay, the implications of the proposed constitutional referendum, including the cost of its conduct, so that those issues could be addressed in a timely manner.

6. All political parties, including the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party, the All People's Congress and the People's Movement for Democratic Change, are intensifying their election-related activities well in advance of the 2007 elections. In that regard, as was indicated in my report of 29 August to the Council (S/2006/695), the general culture of political intolerance emerging in the country is a cause for great concern. The perception among opposition parties that the ruling party may be using its incumbency by leveraging public resources to its advantage while denying the opposition a level playing field remains and may lead to heightened tensions if not addressed at this early stage.

7. The socio-economic marginalization of a large segment of society, in particular young people, renders them susceptible to manipulation by political leaders during the electoral process. The political atmosphere is polarized and the three main political parties have displayed a "winner takes all" attitude. As yet, none of the parties has articulated a clear political platform.

8. The participation of paramount chiefs in partisan politics has become the focus of national debate, with the citizenry generally supporting the role of the traditional leaders. However, there have been reports indicating that opposition party representatives have been prevented from conducting electoral activities in some chiefdoms. While it is obvious that electoral campaigning should be conducted by all in an orderly manner and with respect for the law, there are concerns that the existing legislation prohibiting meetings without prior approval from the relevant paramount chiefs and the police may be abused during the pre-electoral period.

9. Following the controversial election of the paramount chief in the Biriwa Chiefdom, which was conducted without the involvement of the National Electoral Commission, members of the Limba ethnic group filed a petition with the Supreme Court to challenge the legality of the election. On 10 November, the Supreme Court ruled against the petition on the grounds that the election of a paramount chief was not a public election and, therefore, did not require the involvement of the National Electoral Commission.

10. In spite of continued logistical constraints, Parliament continued to improve its oversight functions. During the reporting period, ministers and heads of government agencies were invited to Parliament to provide information on the implementation of their respective mandates. There remains, however, a need for sustained capacity-building of Parliament to strengthen its various oversight committees, which would

bring to the fore its role in promoting accountability and transparency in the public service.

11. Three new bills have been prepared to address practices affecting women's rights, including the Devolution of Estates Act 2006, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act 2006 and the Domestic Violence Act 2006. The enactment of these bills by Parliament will require concerted advocacy, as they seek to legislate issues that touch on a number of deeply entrenched traditional and cultural practices.

12. The Anti-Corruption Commission has concluded investigations into several high-profile cases, involving senior civil servants and parliamentarians and has forwarded them to the Attorney General for prosecution. Prompt action on the cases would attest to the Government's political will to deal with corruption in a resolute way. This would also help dispel the perception that the anti-corruption drive, which was encouraging some time ago, may have stalled.

13. The national anti-corruption strategy was discussed at a conference of the main stakeholders in Freetown on 16 November. The conference decided to establish a review mechanism to remedy identified flaws. Upon completion of the review, the strategy would be consistent with the priorities and actions contained in the Improved Governance and Accountability Pact, agreed by the Government in July 2006, with the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the World Bank and the European Commission.

III. Security situation

14. During the reporting period, the security situation in Sierra Leone remained stable, but still fragile. The most serious threats to the tenuous stability in the country continued to be related to the high level of youth unemployment, the poor social and economic conditions of the people, and the general public perception of the Government's mismanagement of public resources.

15. The national security sector is generally functioning well. The capacity of the Sierra Leone Police to maintain law and order and discharge its security responsibilities continues to develop. On 30 and 31 August, UNIOSIL and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) organized a national conference on the role of the Sierra Leone Police in the 2007 elections. Participants expressed confidence that the Sierra Leone Police is a credible institution capable of maintaining law and order during the electoral process.

16. In recent months, incidents of student demonstrations and industrial actions by junior and middle-level employees in schools have increased. In many cases, the riotous and sometimes destructive behaviour of the students has spilled into the streets, straining the limited resources of the Sierra Leone Police. Many of these incidents are related to the deplorable conditions in the schools and colleges across the country, as well as the poor conditions of service of teachers. The situation has been further exacerbated by the activities of the three major political parties on college campuses.

17. From 6 to 10 November, the country's Cabinet participated in the third regular national security exercise, the purpose of which was to test the capability of Sierra

Leone's security agencies to effectively manage security emergencies that could be externally or internally generated. The exercise was supported by the United Kingdom-led International Military Advisory and Training Team, UNIOSIL and other international partners. In addition, from 11 October to 5 November, the United Kingdom and the partners from Sierra Leone's Armed Forces conducted major military amphibious exercises in Sierra Leone, involving some 3,000 military personnel. The objective of the exercises was to enhance the capacity of Sierra Leone's security sector.

18. In the meantime, Sierra Leone and Guinea have taken further steps to resolve their ongoing border dispute. The ministers of the interior of both countries met on 18 and 19 September in Freetown and decided to request the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to provide boundary demarcation experts to work with the technical committees of both countries. I would like to reiterate my appeal to President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and President Lansana Conté to expedite the peaceful resolution of this matter.

19. The Sierra Leone's security agencies, the United Nations Mission in Liberia and Liberian security agencies continued to conduct concurrent patrols in the areas along the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia. UNIOSIL played a facilitating role. At the same time, the Office continued to discuss modalities of joint border patrols between the Guinean and Sierra Leone's security agencies.

IV. Security sector reform

A. Office of National Security

20. The capacity of the national security architecture in Sierra Leone continues to develop. The Office of National Security has further strengthened its role as the agency responsible for the coordination of all national agencies and government departments on security-related matters. During the reporting period, this important body and the UNIOSIL Military Liaison Team organized a series of workshops aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the provincial and district security committees in information collection, analysis and reporting. The Office of National Security has also established an elections threat assessment committee to identify potential threats to security during the electoral process and to develop a plan for a coordinated response.

B. Sierra Leone Police

21. During the reporting period, the programme for building a new Sierra Leone Police force passed a major milestone when the full strength of 9,500 trained police personnel, established by the Government, was achieved. A recruitment programme for 2007 has been developed for a further 250 officers. To ensure that the police training programme remains operationally relevant, the Sierra Leone Police and the UNIOSIL Police Section have reviewed the training curriculum, adding key updates on basic crowd control and maintenance of public order.

22. The UNIOSIL police personnel, in cooperation with other international partners, have also developed a special training programme aimed at further

enhancing the ability of the Sierra Leone Police to respond to possible civil unrest during the electoral period. United Nations police personnel further suggested the development of a beat policing training programme, in which over 3,000 local police personnel of various ranks have participated. In addition to UNIOSIL's efforts, the Sierra Leone Police benefited from considerable support provided by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and UNDP.

C. Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces

23. The planned downsizing of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces has been completed and its current strength stands at some 10,300 military personnel. However, Sierra Leone is unlikely to be able to sustain an armed force of this size. The Government is therefore currently discussing the appropriate size of the army in the medium term. The Government will be mindful of the delicate socio-economical situation in considering any further retrenchments of armed forces personnel.

24. UNIOSIL conducted a survey of morale within the armed forces. The findings indicated that recent improvements in the training and welfare of army personnel had resulted in a corresponding improvement in morale. There remained, however, a critical shortage of housing for military personnel, in particular in the outlying and border areas. The survey also showed that battalions suffered from an acute lack of adequate equipment, confirming the need to continue adjustments to the Armed Forces. At the same time, logistical support capabilities remained weak.

V. Strengthening the role of the UNIOSIL military and police components

25. Currently, 13 of the 20 authorized United Nations police personnel are deployed to the countryside in regional advisory support teams to advise and support four Sierra Leone Police regional command teams. The Western Area, including Freetown, is covered by five United Nations police officers, given the operational demands of serving the capital with its large population and high crime rate. The workload of UNIOSIL's police personnel has increased considerably, as the Sierra Leone Police prepares to support the 2007 elections. In that respect, the UNIOSIL Police Section is shifting its focus to training Sierra Leone Police officers to perform election-related tasks.

26. In particular, it is envisaged that, during 2007, UNIOSIL police personnel, in cooperation with other partners, will continue to coordinate the development of a Sierra Leone training taskforce that will deliver public order management training to 5,500 Sierra Leone Police officers throughout the country at locations that have been identified as possible hot spots, based on the threat assessments developed by the Sierra Leone Police and the Office of National Security. Furthermore, the UNIOSIL Police Section will continue to support the capacity-building of the Sierra Leone Police by training an additional 25 officers to become a part of the Force's newly formed Evaluation Team to conduct inspections of police performance throughout the country. In order to address the issue of prisoners escaping from police custody, the United Nations police will increase their support to the Sierra Leone Police for the improvement of corrections facilities and training of their management personnel.

27. Given the increased scope of the tasks of the UNIOSIL police personnel, I would like to propose, subject to the Security Council's decision concerning the mandate of the Office, a temporary increase of an additional 10 United Nations police personnel to bring their strength to 30 police personnel. This reinforcement would enable the UNIOSIL Police Section to provide adequate support to the Sierra Leone Police's preparations for its election-related tasks. The additional 10 personnel would be withdrawn in the second half of 2007, after the elections.

28. The 2007 elections will also involve a considerable increase in the workload of the UNIOSIL Military Liaison Team of 10 officers. In particular, there will be additional tasks related to security needs in the provinces, including additional information-gathering in all 12 administrative districts. Another area of focus will be further capacity-building of the provincial and district security committees, whose roles in the electoral process will be critical. The Team is currently involved in assisting the Office of National Security in the preparation of the electoral security plan and will participate in monitoring of the plan in liaison with the Armed Forces' brigades deployed throughout the country. In addition, the Military Liaison Team will continue its daily tasks of liaising with and supporting the Sierra Leonean security forces, especially the Office of National Security, and other stakeholders, including the International Military Advisory and Training Team, and diplomatic missions in Sierra Leone. The Military Liaison Team also maintains close coordination with the Special Court for Sierra Leone. I would therefore propose a temporary increase in the current strength of the UNIOSIL Military Liaison Team of an additional five military advisers, who would also be withdrawn during the second half of 2007.

VI. Preparations for the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections

A. National Electoral Commission

29. The National Electoral Commission, with United Nations assistance, continued to prepare for the voter registration exercise, which is expected to commence between late February and early March. The Commission recently shifted the focus of its efforts to the development of its operational capacity. In that regard, additional core personnel are being recruited, while an advance team of four United Nations technical advisers has already been assigned to support the Commission.

30. A voter registration operational taskforce has been set up, including working groups on such critical areas as data management, procedures and training, public outreach, field coordination, procurement and logistics. The working groups have identified immediate priorities in requirements and activities. Specifications for voter registration equipment and personnel were finalized and the procurement process was effectively launched at the end of October.

31. With United Nations technical assistance, the National Electoral Commission developed its database of estimated voter population per constituency. The field guidelines for distribution of registration centres in the districts have been finalized and the work for distribution and selection of registration centres is under way in the districts. Given the estimated total of over 4 million voters, it is projected that there

will be a maximum of 2,700 voter registration teams, which is the current basis for procurement of materials and training plans.

32. Now that the basic modalities for voter registration have been determined, the National Electoral Commission is gearing up for its public information and voter education campaign. The Commission is already engaged in a broad civic education programme, the Basic Electoral Administration Course, targeting youths from 18 to 25 years old. The programme is expected to reach several thousand youths in its first phase, which started in October and will be completed in December.

33. The United Nations support to the electoral process will continue with the further strengthening of the United Nations electoral advisory team in the coming weeks. International advisers to the National Electoral Commission's headquarters will reach 10 by the end of the year and 18 United Nations Volunteers will arrive during the same period to support the electoral district offices. At its maximum strength, the team is expected to reach the level of 44 advisers by the end of January 2007.

34. In the meantime, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the European Commission and UNDP have agreed to increase their contributions to the budget for the elections. The financial gap for the elections is consequently expected to be reduced to approximately $7 million. I would like to reiterate my appeal to Member States for the urgent provision of additional funding in order to facilitate the successful conduct of the elections.

B. Political Parties Registration Commission

35. UNIOSIL also continues to assist in developing the capacity of the Political Parties Registration Commission. The Commission continues to face serious staffing and resource shortages, as well as a leadership problem. On 2 November, President Kabbah nominated Justice Sydney Warne as the new Chairman of the Political Parties Registration Commission. The appointment will require confirmation by the Parliament. It will be critical for the Government to honour its pledges to support the Commission to ensure that it has the technical, human and other resources necessary to function effectively.

36. In a positive development, on 23 November, the leaders of eight political parties signed an electoral code of conduct. The code had earlier been adopted by representatives of the political parties during a workshop organized by the Political Parties Registration Commission, with the support of UNIOSIL and UNDP, which was held in Freetown on 19 and 20 October. The Political Parties Registration Commission will play a key role in ensuring that political parties comply with the code of conduct.

C. United Nations electoral assessment mission

37. An interdisciplinary electoral assessment mission, led by the Electoral Assistance Division of the Department of Political Affairs of the Secretariat, visited Sierra Leone from 15 to 23 October to conduct a comprehensive review of electoral preparations and to consult with the Government on the assistance the United Nations system could provide to support the electoral process. The

assessment mission met with a broad cross section of national and international electoral stakeholders, including representatives of the Government, civil society, political parties, electoral authorities, the United Nations country team, technical assistance providers, donors and the diplomatic community.

38. The assessment mission identified serious though not insurmountable challenges to the successful conduct of presidential and parliamentary elections, which are scheduled to be held on 28 July 2007. The National Electoral Commission has developed a draft law on boundary delimitation, following a process that was broadly participatory. Passage of the law is delayed in Parliament, however. A final package of amendments to the legal framework for the elections is also in the process of being finalized by the Commission. In addition, the mechanism for resolving electoral disputes (the electoral offences court) has not yet been established. This matter requires urgent attention, including adequate resources for the envisaged court.

39. The assessment mission concluded that, despite these considerable challenges, the elections could be conducted on time and in a generally credible manner, provided that the national electoral institutions receive financial and technical support from the Government and donors in a timely manner; outstanding laws, including on boundary delimitations, are passed expeditiously by the Parliament; the overall security situation remains stable and the national security agencies can meet their responsibilities to secure the electoral process; and all necessary measures are taken to strengthen the electoral dispute mechanisms and the electoral offences court is established quickly, while being broadly acceptable and credible across the political spectrum. In addition, the independence of the electoral institutions should be protected, while international and domestic observation should be strongly encouraged.

D. Recommendations for the Government of Sierra Leone

40. In view of allegations made by opposition parties and some civil society groups, the assessment mission recommended that the Government should avoid creating a perception that state resources were being used to promote the electoral interests of one party. Additionally, as indicated earlier, it is critical that all parties have equitable access to the state media and that paramount chiefs are encouraged to allow free campaigning and political expression in their areas of control.

41. With regard to establishing the necessary legal framework for the conduct of the elections, the Parliament should expedite the passage of the proposed law on boundary delimitation. It should also ensure that the amendments to the legal framework governing the elections are adopted in a timely manner, given the tight time frame in which preparations for the elections must be conducted.

E. Recommendations on the role of the United Nations system in preparing for the elections

42. UNIOSIL and UNDP have established electoral assistance programmes to support the conduct of the elections. Although staffed with qualified experts, the UNDP project team faces considerable challenges in ensuring the procurement of more than $15 million worth of registration and electoral materials, which should be completed in a very short period of time. The assessment mission therefore recommended that the United Nations system provide substantial technical support to the voter registration exercise. As the inclusion of the constitutional referendum on the ballot is expected to complicate the conduct of the elections, the United Nations will need to support the identification of the related technical challenges as soon as possible.

43. Furthermore, the assessment mission recommended that the United Nations system and the international community, in particular African organizations, consider providing long-term observers to the electoral process. The United Nations Communications Group is expected to provide coordinated support to the media coverage of the electoral process.

VII. Human rights and the rule of law

44. Sierra Leone continues to make progress towards adherence to international norms and standards on human rights. However, progress in the area of economic and social rights remains limited.

45. During the reporting period, further work was accomplished in preparing the child rights bill, which is an overarching compilation of laws and policies on children in Sierra Leone that supersedes all existing laws on child rights. The bill has been approved by the Cabinet and the Parliament is expected to pass it by the end of the year. It will be a landmark document, representing the country's compliance with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly resolution 44/25, annex), which was ratified by Sierra Leone in 1990.

46. At the same time, progress was made towards the establishment of the national human rights commission. On 3 October 2006, the Parliament confirmed the nomination by the President of five commissioners to serve as members of the commission. When fully operational, the commission is expected, among other activities, to act upon individual complaints concerning human rights violations, encourage ratification and implementation of international human rights instruments and promote awareness of human rights through information, education and research.

47. The mandate of the commission, as provided for by the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is comprehensive and has raised high public expectations about its work. The commission will therefore face significant challenges, including the need to quickly demonstrate its competence, so that it may win the respect of the population. In this regard, I am very concerned that the $16,000 allocated by the Government for the start-up phase of the commission in the 2006 budget is not adequate to ensure the effective functioning of this important

institution. The cost of the commission's operations for the first two years is estimated at $1 million.

48. Meanwhile, implementation of other recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission continued to make slow progress. In particular, the reparations fund for amputees and war-wounded and communities seriously affected by the war is yet to be established. The Government recently nominated the National Commission for Social Action to lead the implementation of this important recommendation.

49. The judiciary system continues to suffer from capacity constraints. Prolonged pretrial detentions, large case backlogs and excessive remand of cases continue in courts around the country. In the Northern Province, a new high court registry has been established and a high court judge has been assigned exclusively to the region to expedite the processing of cases before the court.

50. UNIOSIL, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, has completed a nationwide assessment of the corrections system in Sierra Leone, with a view to assisting the Government in formulating a comprehensive reform agenda. The corrections system still suffers from poor conditions, which seriously undermine prisoners' human rights. The Justice Sector Development Programme, supported by the United Kingdom and UNDP, continues to facilitate improvements in this area.

VIII. Economic recovery and socio-economic aspects

51. While the post-war macroeconomic development indicators continue to show steady economic stability and even growth, widespread poverty remains pervasive throughout the country. In order to meet the Millennium Development Goal of reducing poverty to 35 per cent by 2015, Sierra Leone will have to shift its focus from reliance on donor aid to wealth creation by the private sector. As an estimated 80-90 per cent of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, major policy changes will be required to bring informal enterprises into the mainstream economy.

52. At the same time, the restoration of commercial extraction of rutile and bauxite in the second quarter of 2006, with the assistance of foreign investors, is very encouraging. This development is expected to push export earnings up by almost four percentage points of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006.

53. External and domestic public debts continue to place a heavy burden on Sierra Leone's economy, impeding the Government's ability to channel resources into vital infrastructure development. As at the end of 2005, the external debt, including arrears, stood at $1.69 billion. In the meantime, interim external debt relief for Sierra Leone from March 2002 to October 2005 amounted to $131.3 million, including unconditional delivery of debt relief under the World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. Sierra Leone is expected to reach the completion point of the Initiative by the end of the year and it is anticipated that creditors will grant further debt relief.

54. On 9 October, the Government launched a youth employment and empowerment scheme as part of its efforts to address growing youth unemployment. However, its implementation is constrained by lack of resources, as well as institutional capacity constraints. Significant external assistance will be required,

including targeted infrastructure and quick-impact development projects aimed at promoting economic growth, development and job creation.

IX. Subregional cooperation

55. Pursuant to the decision taken by the African Union at the level of ministers and Heads of State, a logistics depot for ECOWAS will be established in Sierra Leone. The Government of Sierra Leone and ECOWAS have concluded a headquarters agreement and on 11 October the Government formally handed over to ECOWAS the facility at the Hastings Airfield that will serve as the logistics depot.

56. Efforts are being made to revitalize the Mano River Union secretariat, located in Freetown. UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team in Sierra Leone have provided some logistical assistance to build the capacity of the secretariat. UNDP funded the renovation and furnishing of the office building and also supplied office equipment and stationery to support the operations of the secretariat, and UNDP and the United Nations Population Fund donated two vehicles for its official use. Nonetheless, the financial and logistical problems of the secretariat remain acute. In addition, its human resource capacity needs to be enhanced to meet the growing demands of development and conflict management in the subregion. In that regard, additional support, from both the member States of the Union and the international community, is needed to make the secretariat operational and effective.

X. Implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security

57. During their consultations on 7 September 2006, members of the Security Council requested UNIOSIL to develop an action plan for the implementation of Council resolution 1325 (2000) and to present it in a report. In that regard, in October 2006, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations of the Secretariat sent an expert to Sierra Leone to assist UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team in preparing the plan, who identified activities that could be implemented by UNIOSIL and the country team during 2007.

58. The action plan seeks, in particular, to strengthen the capacity of the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police to address sexual and gender-based violence. It targets key areas such as training, public education and information campaigns on sexual and gender-based violence. Under the plan, UNIOSIL will work with partner agencies to strengthen the capacity of the Family Support Unit, organize monthly radio programmes to raise public awareness of sexual and gender-based violence and advocate for the incorporation into domestic law of the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women[1] and other international human rights instruments.

59. The action plan also emphasizes the inclusion of gender issues in the concept of operations for the electoral process, in particular in the key areas of voter education and voter registration. The plan further commits UNIOSIL to invest considerably in building women's confidence and capacity to participate in the

[1] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378.

political process and to develop a strategy to increase women's representation and participation in the upcoming election by March 2007. It is envisaged that these initiatives, together with continued support to local women's groups, including women's wings of all political parties, will enhance opportunities for women, both as candidates and voters, in the 2007 national elections.

60. The action plan also requests the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) to develop a standardized capacity-building module on HIV/AIDS for all agencies to address the issue. In addition, the plan stresses that all necessary action should be taken to empower Sierra Leonean women economically and, to that end, calls for funding of microprojects, with special focus on women, which would provide the much-needed resources, in particular for women, in rural areas.

61. In keeping with the action plan, UNIOSIL will assist the newly established Human Rights Commission in drafting a national action plan on human rights for Sierra Leone, with particular emphasis on the rights of women. The action plan requests UNIOSIL to support the Government of Sierra Leone in finalizing by December 2006 a draft report on its implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and to work closely with the Law Reform Commission of Sierra Leone to review and repeal discriminatory laws against women by December 2007. In that regard, UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team will continue to make every effort to ensure that the three bills, which will address practices affecting women's rights, currently under consideration by the Office of the Attorney General, are expeditiously submitted to Parliament and approved by the legislature at the earliest possible date.

62. The plan also calls for greater collaboration between entities of the United Nations system, governmental institutions and civil society organizations in the implementation of related activities and lays greater emphasis on building local partnerships with women's organizations, capacity-building of national institutions and civil society organizations, support for advocacy, influencing policies and raising national awareness of resolution 1325 (2000).

63. In this regard, the plan emphasizes the need for regular consultations among local non-governmental organizations and women's groups and encourages their role in conflict prevention and resolution. The action plan further outlines specific interventions that will be undertaken by the United Nations and provides for a midterm review to assess the progress and impact of implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) by United Nations bodies in Sierra Leone. Effective implementation of the plan will require the establishment of a full-time post of gender adviser in UNIOSIL. In addition, the United Nations has developed a comprehensive communications strategy for the promotion of the action plan.

XI. Public information

64. The Public Information Section of UNIOSIL continues to facilitate the outreach work of the Office and its substantive sections. The Section leads and coordinates the activities of the United Nations Communications Group, which has been established at the initiative of UNIOSIL and comprises public relations components of all United Nations entities operating in Sierra Leone. United Nations Radio is currently broadcasting 60 hours of programming per week, ranging from

news bulletins to interactive panel discussions on many critical issues, such as sexual exploitation and abuse, women in politics, national security and accountability of the Government.

65. As a first step towards its strategic goal of transferring United Nations Radio to national ownership, UNIOSIL plans to convert it into an independent public access radio station, through a project managed by the Swiss Hirondelle Foundation, which provides for the production of news and information programmes and journalism training in partnership with Fourah Bay College, University of Freetown. It is thus expected that a team of qualified radio journalists will be prepared who would constitute the core staff, once United Nations Radio's transformation into a national independent radio station has been completed. UNDP has played a critical role in the process.

XII. Personnel conduct

66. UNIOSIL has continued to actively train all its personnel on the United Nations standards of conduct and the code of conduct. The United Nations country team joint taskforce on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, in collaboration with United Nations Radio, maintained the weekly series of radio panel discussions and call-in programmes to increase public awareness about sexual exploitation and abuse-related issues. The three allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse made against civilian personnel in 2006 are under investigation.

XIII. Observations and recommendations

67. While Sierra Leone continues to make progress in its peacebuilding efforts, the country still faces major challenges and will need the sustained support of the international community for the foreseeable future, especially in its efforts to address the root causes of the past conflict. I am, therefore, pleased with the outcome of the 12 October Peacebuilding Commission meeting on Sierra Leone, in particular its decision to declare Sierra Leone eligible to benefit from the Peacebuilding Fund. I urge the Government of Sierra Leone to seize this unique opportunity and work closely with the Peacebuilding Commission to make further progress in consolidating peace in the country.

68. Progress made in enhancing the capacity of the security sector is encouraging. However, there is still a need to further strengthen and rationalize the security architecture of Sierra Leone, so that both the Sierra Leone Police and the Armed Forces could be sustainable in the long term, and also carry out their tasks effectively, in particular in connection with the 2007 elections. The efforts to promote good governance and fight corruption should be stepped up. Also, much more needs to be done to transform the private sector in Sierra Leone into a driving force of the economy, which generates wealth and employment opportunities. Greater attention should also be paid to the urgent needs of the judiciary and the promotion of human rights, especially those of women.

69. The successful conduct of the 2007 elections and the wide acceptance of the outcome will be important indicators of the sustainability of peace and stability in the country. Sierra Leone needs considerable technical and material support from its

international partners to ensure the success of the elections. In this regard, the $7 million electoral budget shortfall remains a source of major concern. I therefore appeal to Member States to contribute the resources required to close this funding gap.

70. I also recommend that the Security Council approve the increase of the strength of the UNIOSIL Military Liaison Team by 5 additional officers and that of the Police Section by 10 additional police officers to ensure effective support for Sierra Leone's security sector in carrying out its election-related responsibilities. In calling upon Sierra Leone's partners and other stakeholders to stay the course and do all they can to support the electoral process, I also wish to reiterate the importance of the Government of Sierra Leone honouring its obligations to support the electoral institutions, the National Electoral Commission and the Political Parties Registration Commission, with the necessary staffing and other resources.

71. Overall, the period beginning in early 2007 will be critical for the electoral preparations. All technical support from the United Nations and other donors will need to be delivered in a timely manner in order to help the National Electoral Commission and national security agencies fully meet the significant election-related challenges facing them. It would also be important for the international community to contribute in a major way to the observation of the elections.

72. UNIOSIL has made a significant contribution in assisting the Government of Sierra Leone to consolidate peace and address the root causes of the conflict over the past 12 months. The July 2007 elections will be a major milestone, which should help define an exit strategy for UNIOSIL. In that regard, it would be important to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the role of the Office, closer to the election date, with a view to defining its exit point after the elections. In the meantime, I recommend the extension of the mandate of UNIOSIL for an additional 12 months, until 31 December 2007.

73. In conclusion, I would like to express my appreciation to the Government of Sierra Leone and its international partners for their close cooperation with UNIOSIL and the United Nations country team. I also extend my gratitude to the countries contributing military and police personnel to UNIOSIL for their continued support. I would also like to thank my Executive Representative, Victor Angelo, and all the personnel of the United Nations in Sierra Leone, for their tireless efforts to help ensure that Sierra Leone achieves lasting peace, security and sustainable development.